two of the stage horses hitched in the lea of the shack. The Eastern man had seen 'em when he came back from his early trip to Trixey's, and Jim had been hired to round 'em up.

What for? No more had we asked that question when out comes Mr. Boston with the two women wrapped up to the eyes.

The storm had stopped and they were determined to push on at once. No advice that the Judge, or Bill, or I, could give 'em shook their determination, and we could only help the women onto the critters and watch Boston lead 'em down the bluff to the road.

The wind was still blowing like all git out, and it was warm and comfortable in the shack, so we didn't watch 'em fur. But I wondered afterward if they really turned toward Cruikshank when they reached the foot of the bluff.

Two hours later my doubts revived wonderful. Half the crowd from Trixey's, and some fellows from Cruikshank, piled into the shack on top of us. They were after Rugg, the man who killed Joe Peterman.

It seemed that somebody had finally got wise and traced him to Trixey's, where he had presented himself in woman's togs. The sheriff was a good friend to Trixey, and the boys believed the old man wasn't so blind to the identity of the strange woman as he had made off.

"Glory be to Jehosaphat!" yells Bill Borrowman. "That was the chaperon young Bostonbeans found for our lady passenger."

When the gang heard they were off for Cruikshank, they piled out after 'em. I knew it would be all day with Rugg if they caught him, so I said nothing; their trail filled up with drifting snow as fast as it was made, the wind being still keen.

We got the stage-coach fixed, borrowed fresh horses, and got into Cruikshank ourselves before night. We looked up the sheriff, Bill and me, and he loosened up to us.

The hubbub was all over, and the lynching party was mostly too drunk to feel animosity. "Besides," says the sheriff, "they're back at the railroad by this time, and out of the county, which is better."

"Sure, I knew that was what he was aiming for when he got away from here in the skirts. He killed Peterman, but he'd oughtn't to be hung for that. Peterman wasn't worth it."

"But," I says, "what do you think of a murderer for a chaperon?"

"Great. If that young chap you tell me of hadn't found him at Trixey's, the poor fellow would sure be dancing in the empty air somewhere thereabout. I reckon the Boston lad must have recognized him in spite of the disguise before he lugged him over to keep the girl company."

"Recognized him?" gasped Bill.

"Yep. You see, Rugg told me all about himself. He was waiting for his daughter to join him here in Cruikshank when he got into trouble over Peterman. I reckon that was his daughter you brought along with you in the stage."

"I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed Bill Borrowman. "I'm durned sorry I made fun of that snipe from Boston. He may have smelt high of codfish, but he was the real goods, eh?"

I agreed.

ERIC'S INVASION

By ELEANOR M. INGRAM

THE Lady Elfrida sends greeting and prays that Earl Eric will enter, alone."

There was a universal movement of distrust among the body of armed men before the castle and they regarded the speaker suspiciously.

"Is it a Saxon custom to send women to answer a defiance?" asked a gray haired soldier roughly.

The girl on the steps turned her blue eyes on him in grave consideration.

"Are you Earl Eric?" she inquired.

A ripple of laughter ran through the ranks and the amused glances brought a flush to her face.

"I do not know your lord," she said appealingly. "Will you not send for him that he may hear my message?"

"He is sent for, but there is little chance that he will enter for your men to slay defenseless," answered the soldier who had spoken before.

The girl shrank against the castle door and waited with downcast eyes, not daring to offer any denial lest it provoke them farther. She did not notice the men divide to give passage to their chief, not, indeed, perceive his presence until he spoke.

"You would give Alred's answer, maiden?" he asked, gazing at this unusual messenger with some curiosity in his large gray eyes.

The girl started and raised her head. "You are Earl Eric?" she faltered.

He nodded, smiling at the Saxon title. She caught the smile and regained her courage a little; this formidable sea-king looked very young in spite of his superb height and glittering mail.

"The Lady Elfrida sends greeting and prays you to enter, alone," she repeated, hesitating before the last word.

The viking made a gesture of surprise.

"The Lady Elfrida!" he exclaimed. "Who is she? Where is your master?"

"He is not here, and the Lady Elfrida commands in his absence," the girl answered. "She would speak with you, Earl Eric. Indeed, we mean no treachery."

The Norseman bent a keen look on her, then studied the long, low stone building thoughtfully.

"I will go with you, maiden," he announced finally. "You, Sigurd," turning to the gray haired warrior, "remain here, and if I do not return in an hour you will follow me."

A murmur of protest broke from the men and Sigurd struck his sword against the ground angrily.

"By Odin and Thor, you are mad, Sea-king," he cried. "Think you I will stand by while they kill you in there alone? Where Eric goes we go also, though we tear the castle down to make our way. I will not stay."

"You will stay, or you will return to Norway in the hold of my ship, Sigurd Sigurdson," said his master sternly. "Take your choice."

"Better so than to leave you here," Sigurd retorted. But his eyes fell as he spoke, and satisfied, Eric turned away, leaving his men looking at each other uncertainly.

"He is mad," said Sigurd, sullenly, as the door closed behind him. "Mad. Who would trust a Saxon? It will be but a brief hour ere I follow."

There was a general assent to this, and leaning on their battle-axes the Norsemen waited eagerly for the nearest possible moment they might call an hour before going to their chief.

Without, the July sun was dazzling, but in the castle it was cool and dark, so much so that on entering Eric paused until his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom.

The girl waited patiently, stroking a great dog which had come forward, and which was the only occupant of a hall evidently designed to contain the many followers of a Saxon noble. The viking glanced around with distrust at the unusual quiet, noting the signs of recent occupation.

"Where is your mistress, maiden?" he demanded.

"She waits above," the girl answered, and crossing the hall she led the way to the upper rooms. At the head of the stairs she stopped and lifted a curtain, through which came a soft rhythmic hum. Eric bent his head that the golden wings on his helmet might pass the low door, and entered.

The long room was flooded with sunlight, and the wild roses that had climbed to the windows scattered their petals and perfume with every gust of summer wind. No hint of the danger without was visible in the dainty repose of the place or in the bearing of the dozen maidens who sat on either side, their braids falling over their shoulders, their eyes fixed demurely on the spinning-wheels before them. If they were paler than usual and the threads they spun were uneven, those were things a man would hardly notice.

Indeed, the viking was not regarding them. From a chair on the little dais their mistress had risen at his entrance and on her his attention was concentrated. To the Lady Elfrida this sea-king differed not greatly from the Saxon nobles she had always known, except perhaps in height and the peculiar brilliancy of his gray eyes, but to Eric her beauty was of a type so strange as to absolutely startle him. The silken masses of blue-black hair, the large dark eyes, the slight and exquisite grace of her figure in its scarlet draperies, were unlike anything he had ever seen or imagined. The sunlight seemed to deepen around her, leaving the Saxon maidens faded and colorless.

She met Eric's gaze gravely as he approached, well accustomed to surprise in those who saw her for the first time.

"I give you greeting, Earl Eric," she said with dignity, "and I thank you for trusting us so far."

Her very voice was different from the women he had known; clearer, more gentle. Eric drew a quick breath before he answered.

"Freya protect you, lady. Though Alred's men should slay me, my trust is more than rewarded in seeing you."

Elfrida blushed deeply; the Saxon nobles were not skilled in compliment and for an instant she lost the thread of her speech.

"My uncle is not here," she said hastily.

"The Thane Alred is your uncle?"

"Yes. I am an orphan," she answered, and as he waited quietly she continued with more composure. "We are quite alone, Earl Eric. It is because of that I sent for you. My maidens and I ask your pity for our helplessness. There is no man left in the castle either to resist you or defend us."

Eric made a gesture of amazement.

"Lady, it is impossible," he exclaimed. "You ask me to believe that Alred has left his stronghold garrisoned by women? Where has he gone?"

Elfrida shook her head. "It is so, Earl Eric."

He looked at her incredulously. "But where is he, then?" he repeated.

Elfrida's eyes fell and she rested her hand on the back of the chair at her side.

"They have gone in search of you," she said in a low voice. "They heard you had landed down the coast at Ethelwold."

Sudden comprehension flashed into Eric's face and he smiled grimly. The Saxons were watching the coast twenty miles away while he walked unmolested into their castle. A heap of smoking ruins would meet Alred when he returned from his fruitless quest and the destroyer's ships would be on the ocean laden with his wealth. It was a fitting theme for a *saga* that would be sung many a year in Norway after he himself were dead and otherwise forgotten. He had only to call Sigurd and it was done.

But at his first movement Elfrida lifted her eyes swiftly, and guessing his thoughts held out her hands appealingly.

"Earl Eric, will you wreak your vengeance on us?" she asked. "Is the fault ours that Saxons and Norsemen are at strife? Will it make you happier, when you gaze on the maiden you love, to know we other maidens have died at your command?"

The young viking looked at her curiously.

"I love no maiden," he said.

"You will, then, some day," Elfrida answered.

There was a little silence, broken only by the monotonous whir of the spinning-wheels.

"I meant no danger to your maidens," Eric said at last. "They shall be set free to seek shelter where they will, but the castle is mine."

"Much honor and fame will it bring you to win Alred's castle in his absence," retorted Elfrida with quivering lips.

"Would Alred do less to me?" Eric asked haughtily. "Does he not hunt me now in Ethelwold?"

"I have heard that Eric Fairhair was less cruel than other men. From any other I would not have asked forbearance," she answered.

"You ask me to leave you castle and freedom; how shall I explain this to my men?"

"Are you not master of your own soldiers?" asked Elfrida, lifting her delicate eyebrows.

Eric made a gesture of mingled anger and amusement.

"If I so choose," he began, then paused before a new idea. This fragile girl with a spirit equal to his own, why should he leave her with the stolid Saxons? It came to him with a shock that he would not soon put this strange half hour from his mind. His eyes softened, and meeting their expression Elfrida's own dilated wonderingly.

"Will you be my wife?" he asked gently.

The Saxon gasped, and drawing back a step colored to her temples.

"That is not possible, Sea-king," she replied with dignity.

"Why not?"

"Because I do not know you. Because I am betrothed to Wulfred of Redhyl."

A sudden storm darkened Eric's fair brow.

"You love this man?" he demanded fiercely.

Elfrida glanced up and quailed in spite of herself.

"Nay, he is old. I love no man," she said coldly. The viking bit his lip.

"So be it," he answered curtly. "I wish no unwilling bride. Keep all that you have asked. I leave you to your aged lover. Yet, when you look on him, remember you were offered the love of a man." And turning on his heel Eric left the room without looking again at the trembling Elfrida.

But before he reached the door of the hall below he heard the quick patter of feet on the stairs and the girl who had admitted him appeared.

"I will unbolt the door," she explained.

He nodded, and watched moodily as she slid the heavy bars. Over the last one she lingered.

"The Lady Elfrida is loving and gentle; she pleases her uncle in this marriage," she said under her breath.

Eric's eyes lighted suddenly. "Did she send you to tell me this?" he demanded.

"No," the girl faltered, "I pity her; Wulfred is wealthy, but old and harsh."

"When do they wed?"

"At Yuletide."

The viking was silent a moment, knitting his brows thoughtfully.

"Say nothing of this to your mistress," he said finally, "and I thank you, maiden."

He pressed into her hand a massive golden chain that had hung over his armor and went out to his waiting men.

It was quite time; their short patience was almost exhausted and their shout of greeting drove the last vestige of color from the cheeks of the frightened maidens above.

"We have Earl Eric's word for our safety," said Lady Elfrida proudly, and going back to her chair she took up her embroidery again. The maidens looked at each other doubtfully.

"The Norsemen are wild; pray heaven he can control them," murmured one timidly. Elfrida did not answer. She fancied Eric was not accustomed to contradiction from his men.

Nevertheless the viking used no force to dissuade his followers from sacking the castle; he simply told them its mistress was his future wife.

The sea-king's visit was only an incident in those days; men were used to danger and invasion, but it had two results. The Thane Alred watched his castle better and Lady Elfrida took a dislike to her betrothed. Naturally she did not speak of this new caprice, but it grew in secret. In spite of herself Eric's words recurred to her the first time Wulfred appeared afterwards. She surveyed the long furred robe, the

staff on which he leaned, his gray beard, and the picture flashed before her of a tall figure in shining armor with waving fair hair falling over its shoulders. The contrast was not agreeable. Wulfred's power and wealth had lost their charm. Of course, she hated the inperious viking but she began to hate Wulfred also.

In the long hours spent at her embroidery frame Elfrida had plenty of time for thinking. Many a fancy flitted through the dark and graceful head as the deft fingers drew the threads in and out, for the Saxon was weaving her wedding gown, adorning it with sprays of mistletoe in gleaming silver. From hating Eric she gradually fell to thinking how he must hate her.

"I might at least have answered him courteously," she said to herself with burning cheeks.

Once she noticed her maiden Editha wearing a golden chain and asked carelessly whence it came.

"The Earl Eric gave it me when I opened the door that he might pass out," replied Editha.

Elfrida was silent, bending over her work. The next day she offered Editha a bracelet of gems in exchange for the chain, saying it was too heavy for maiden's wear.

Nevertheless she wore it herself, and Wulfred observed it. In answer to his question he only received a haughty stare and the brief statement, "From Editha."

The noble Wulfred was learning something heretofore unsuspected of his bride's temper, but he accepted it meekly. On his next visit he brought a collection of bracelets, necklaces, chains, and clasps that might have appeased a queen. Elfrida cast a single glance at them from under her long lashes and thanked him coldly.

One night as she sat in the great carved chair at her uncle's side, playing with the food before her, the conversation turned as usual on the vikings.

"Of one, at least, we are free," said Alred. "At the battle of Dunemere Eric Fairhair was carried sorely wounded from the field. But for his men, who fought their way to his ships bearing him with them, Eric would have never returned to Norway."

"Pity it is that he should have escaped. Perchance he will die of his wounds," said Wulfred.

Elfrida slowly turned her eyes on him with an expression worthy of Eric himself and her fingers curled hard around the golden chain, but she did not speak.

Not even to herself did the Lady Elfrida admit she cared for Eric Fairhair, but she wept all that night with her cheek resting on his chain. For a week she would not see Wulfred, keeping her chamber under pretense of illness, until her uncle threatened to send for a wise woman to cure her.

Autumn came and went; Elfrida wept again at the first snowfall. Her bright color had faded a little and more than one tear glittered among the mistletoe berries she embroidered.

From dawn till dark Alred and his companions hunted through the forests, knowing the raging winter seas would keep even the vikings in their castles. In the evenings they drank and sang, toasting Elfrida's approaching marriage and the noble Wulfred.

The Saxon's eyes seemed to grow larger and darker as time went on. The night before the wedding she fled to Editha's room and clung to her sobbing that she could not bear it, that they must steal away together somewhere.

But she knew well enough it was not possible, and the next morning found her calm and stately in her silken robes, her black hair braided with Wulfred's pearls.

A frightful storm raged without, shaking the castle to its foundations and drifting the snow against doors and windows. Wulfred's party was so long delayed that the short winter day had turned to dusk before all started for the church. A wild hope that her betrothed had perished in the blizzard supported Elfrida through the long delay, and as Editha wrapped her in furs for the journey she changed it to a prayer that she herself might die before she reached the church. Half unconsciously the Christian Elfrida repeated Eric's first greeting to her.

"Freya protect me," she murmured over and over. "Freya protect me."

It had ceased snowing, although the wind still howled drearily through the trees. The rest of the party laughed

and shouted, striving to keep their torches lit and regarding the storm as an additional source of mirth. Elfrida held the bridle mechanically, gazing ahead like one dazed. The gaiety, the boisterous laughter as one or another slipped in the snow or wandered from the path, were inexpressibly hateful to her.

"Freya protect me," she whispered.

A sudden blast of wind swooped upon them, extinguishing every light, and in the darkness pandemonium broke loose.

For a moment Elfrida thought it her own escort's wild sport, but the ring of steel and shouts of anger undeceived her. In an instant a battle was raging around her with all its appalling din. Editha was swept from her side at the first and she was unable to tell friend from foe. Bewildered and frightened she clung to her horse, not daring to attempt an escape in the dense forest. Suddenly over the tumult a voice rang out.

"Sigurd, a torch!" it called.

Elfrida gave a cry, then slipping to the ground as a light flared up she pushed back her hood and stood motionless. A tall figure rushed towards her and catching the gleam of golden hair, Elfrida submitted unresistingly to the strong arms that lifted her from the snow.

After that she scarcely knew what passed. Eric drew the hood around her and she hid her eyes on his breast. Of the fierce struggle as the little band, outnumbered five to one, closed about them and fought their way toward the coast, she was only conscious when Eric himself took part. For once the viking let his men bear the brunt of the fight and they enjoyed it as only Norsemen could. The darkness aided them, too, and the Saxons were under the disadvantage of having no idea where their enemies were trying to go, while the Norsemen knew perfectly the direction of their ship.

At a little passage between two cliffs Sigurd came to his master.

"Sea-king, go you on with the maid," he said earnestly. "We can lose these Saxon pigs in their own forest; they are half drunk."

Eric glanced over the Saxon party and nodded.

"Good," he answered, "but risk not my men in this, Sigurd. Stay not long."

"We have lost none so far," was the stolid reply.

"So I would have it," Eric said, turning into the forest beyond.

The journey through the dark, snow-covered country was no easy task, even with so slight a burden as Elfrida, but the viking managed it with wonderful skill. Not once did he let the drooping branches touch her or slip himself on the icy, uneven ground. Gradually, however, there grew in his heart a strange anxiety at her passive silence. He had expected a struggle, an outcry, but she lay motionless in his arms. Had she fainted?

During the long months since he saw her, many of them passed in fever and pain from his wound, he had often pictured her wrath and scorn when she found herself a prisoner. He did not hesitate for that, not for an instant did he swerve from his purpose, but he imagined that the anger of this frail creature might sting. In the end he believed the very power of his love would win her. But at first? Certainly he had not expected this meek submission and it commenced to alarm him. Suppose, before he reached her, she had been wounded in the confusion?

It was quite possible, and Eric paled under the tan of wind and sun. The idea that she might have died in this bitter cold journey through the snow struck him with unbearable pain, and stopping abruptly he bent his head to listen for her breathing. His fair hair brushed Elfrida's cheek and quivering she put up a little protesting hand. Neither cold nor fear was she conscious of during the long hour when she felt Eric's heart beat beneath her head.

"Let not my lord delay," she faltered timidly, "lest Wulfred overtake us."

For a moment Eric stood unable to credit his hearing, then as the full meaning of her words burst on him he uttered a fierce exclamation and bending his head still lower he kissed her.

Elfrida nestled to him contentedly. From the forest behind them came the distant clash of steel and a minute later Sigurd's questioning hail.

"All's well," rang Eric's voice in clear and joyous answer. And clasping Elfrida closer, he carried her down to the waiting ship.